

Legislative Petitions Gave Voice to Virginians

Your Humble Petitioner, a free exhibition at the Library of Virginia, explores the personal stories contained within a unique collection.

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RICHMOND, VIRGINIA – *Your Humble Petitioner*, a free exhibition at the Library of Virginia running February 7–November 19, 2022, reveals the poignant stories of Virginians from all walks of life that can be found in the Library’s Legislative Petitions Collection. The collection contains a gold mine of historical information not available anywhere else.

Have you ever signed a petition? Today, we’re familiar with signing petitions to voice concerns over topics such as redistricting or traffic control or any number of issues. But did you know that it’s an ancient right—one that’s enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution? Imagine having to explain to the House of Delegates why you want to divorce your spouse, or change your name, or take other actions that affect your life. Virginians had to do just that for nearly a century. *Your Humble Petitioner* highlights petitions that involved deeply personal issues such as divorce and requests by emancipated Black people to remain in the commonwealth, offering a glimpse into the realities of 18th- and 19th-century life.

The Legislative Petitions Collection at the Library of Virginia numbers approximately 25,000 petitions submitted to the General Assembly between 1776 and 1865, some presented by groups, but many more submitted by individuals. During the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War, Virginians submitted petitions to the General Assembly to bring local or personal issues to the attention of their legislators. The collection reveals how Virginians communicated their concerns on a wide range of topics, offering insights into popular opinion on matters both public and private. To obtain legal permission to operate a ferry, maintain a tavern, or stop hogs from running loose through a town, residents of the commonwealth were required to submit a petition into the House of Delegates to begin the process of

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acceptance or rejection. The right to petition was not restricted by class, race, or sex. Although they could not vote, women and Black Virginians, both enslaved and free, could petition the General Assembly.

The exhibition includes the story of James Lafayette, who was enslaved in New Kent County but became a spy during the American Revolution, serving under the Marquis de Lafayette. In 1786, he successfully petitioned the General Assembly for his freedom. His petition describes his service: “That during the time of his serving the Marquiss he often at the peril of his life found means to frequent the British Camp, by which means he kept open a channel of the most useful communications to the army of the state...”

Another featured petition shares the story of Norfolk resident Mary Webley, whose leg was broken by a cannonball fired from a British warship in 1776. She and her family were already struggling because her husband was unable to work after losing an arm years before the war. Webley’s petition to the General Assembly for aid described her situation: “She hath at present no Ways or Means to procure Shelter or acquire Subsistence for herself and miserable little children, her Husband and Self having had all their effects totally destroyed in the Flames of Norfolk...”

What was the process for petitioning the General Assembly? The petitioner submitted a petition to a delegate who then presented and read the petition to the House of Delegates. If not immediately rejected, the petition was referred to a committee who would recommend an action. If the committee deemed the petition acceptable, the delegates drew up a bill that had to pass three readings. In the first reading, the bill was accepted or rejected. At the second reading, delegates debated and amended the bill. If the bill passed the third reading, it then was sent to the Senate for approval or rejection. Both houses had to approve the bill for it to become law. The clerk of the House of Delegates endorsed the petition at each step until its final endorsement of accepted or rejected.

The Library of Virginia’s Legislative Petitions Collection is a rich source of stories about ordinary Virginians and their lives. The collection is searchable by keyword, locality, and subject.

<https://www.virginiamemory.com/collections/petitions>

“We can relate to these petitions because they are deeply personal and often heartbreaking,” said Gregg Kimball, the Library’s director of Public Services and Outreach. “But they also brightly illuminate the big issues of the time such as the constraints on freedom, religious intolerance, and the relationship of citizens to the State. This combination makes them remarkable teaching tools.”

Exhibition-related events planned for 2022 include a May 13 workshop on using legislative petitions for genealogical research (yourhumblepetitioner-legislativepetitions.eventbrite.com) and a June 9 discussion featuring author Warren Eugene Milteer Jr., who used the Library’s Local Records Collection in the research for his book *Beyond Slavery’s Shadow: Free People of Color in the South*. Look for information on the Library’s calendar (www.lva.virginia.gov/news) and Facebook page on additional related events in the future.

Find exhibition-related images here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/61t5fzg7ud9bk86/AACU817Hj7TD5ZgM0-dHKoSNa?dl=0>

About the Library of Virginia

The Library of Virginia is one of the oldest agencies of Virginia government, founded in 1823 to preserve and provide access to the state's incomparable printed and manuscript holdings. Its collection, which has grown steadily through the years, is the most comprehensive resource in the world for the study of Virginia history, culture, and government with over 130 million items in the collections. The Library also engages the public through in-person and virtual events, education programs, and online resources that reach nearly 4 million individuals each year throughout the commonwealth and beyond. Visit www.lva.virginia.gov.

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